DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 533 CG 011 981

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TITLE Home Letters as a Technique in Behavior Management.
PUB DATE May 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwestern Association of Behavior Analysis (3rd, Chicago, Illinois, May 14-17, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Change; *Home Programs; Mothers; *Motivation; *Parent School Relationship; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; *Positive Reinforcement; *Primary Education; Reinforcement; Research Projects; Rewards

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a first grader, manifesting high rates of problem behaviors in school, who was involved in two separate behavior management programs. Discussion of general behavior modification principles did not reduce problem behavior, but problem behaviors decreased considerably after daily letters from the teacher were sent to the child's mother (the mother made a family trip contingent upon receiving "good" conduct letters). Following the family trip, letters continued to be sent home, and the child's school misbehavior rates declined even further. This suggests that teacher and mother praise, and the good behavior note, successfully maintained the child's appropriate classroom behaviors. The author cautions that, given the case-study nature of this experiment, the findings need to be interpreted with caution. Replication with a larger sample would provide requisite data for determining the generalizability of findings. (Author/PFS)

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ED146533

Home-Letters as a Technique in Behavior Management

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Paper presented at the Midwestern Association of Behavior Analysis, Chicago, May 1977.

CG011981

Home-Letters as a Technique in Behavior Management

Various behavioral techniques using reinforcers available in school settings have successfully reduced problem behaviors in school children. For example, the efficacy of token economies has been repeatedly demonstrated (O'Leary & Becker, 1967; O'Leary, Becker, Evans & Saudargas, 1969). Some studies have also included resources available in home or residential settings. In Bailey, Wolf and Phillips' (1970) study, for example, a school teacher sent daily conduct cards, describing study time and misconduct, to personnel at a residential home. When these reports earned positive and negative rewards at the residential center, study time improved and disruptive classroom behavior decreased. In another study, McKenzie, Clark, Wolf, Kothera, and Benson (1968) instructed parents to reward their children with various amounts of money for grades C and better and to withdraw money for incompletes. By school end, academic performance had improved for all children. Ayllon, Garger and Pisor (1975) asked a teacher to send parents daily "good behavior" letters if their children were not disruptive in class. Parents gave their children rewards, recognition, and appreciation when they returned home with this letter. Rates of classroom disruptiveness were reduced dramatically when this technique was implemented. The above studies indicate that a multitude of reinforcers in school and home settings have been used effectively in behavior management interventions. It is unfortunate that adequate follow-ups of these interventions often have not been conducted.

The present study investigated the differential effectiveness of two behavioral strategies (1. instructions were given to the teacher to reward appropriate and ignore problem behaviors, and 2. notes describing daily behavior were sent to the child's mother and a home contingency program was implemented) in bringing about reductions in a child's problem behaviors. The positive methodological features of the study included a four week baseline period, two separate behavioral interventions, and a four week follow-up period to assess generalization of program gains.

Method

The educational setting for this program was a parochial school located in Chicago. A six year, three month old black male was selected by the teacher for this school consultation program because of high levels of inappropriate classroom behavior.

Continuous behavioral data were obtained from daily classroom observations by two research technicians, not familiar with the purpose of the study, utilizing a modified version of the format described in Solomon and Wahler (1973). The three behavioral classifications, with appropriate desirable and problem behaviors contained within each, were defined as:

Talking (T)	desirable	- child speaks when recognized by teacher
	problem	- child emits a nonpermitted sound, in violation of the teacher's rules
Task (TK)	desirable	- child focusing on task (e.g., manipula-

ting objects at his own desk in accordance with teacher's rules)

problem - child focusing off task (e.g., using his hands to play with his own property, community property, another child's property, or another child, thereby violating teacher's rules)

Out of Seat (O) desirable - child leaves seat following teacher's permission

problem - child leaves seat without permission

The target child was observed during a morning reading period for five minutes daily, using a fifteen second observe and fifteen second record observational format. Only the first problem or desirable behavior observed during the fifteen second observe interval was recorded. The daily average percent of problem behaviors was computed by summing the three types of problem behaviors and dividing by the number of fifteen second intervals the child was observed.

Two classroom observors reached $\geq$ 80% agreement on each category for four consecutive sessions prior to the start of baseline observations. During the different phases of the project, weekly reliability checks were made. Average observer agreement [agreements/agreement and disagreements] was 99% for type of activity (e.g., talking, on-task, out of seat) and 99% for problem vs. desirable behavior.

Program

There were four phases in the study. During the first four weeks (Phase 1), baseline measures of the three behavioral categories were obtained. During weeks five and six (Phase 2), the intervention consisted of weekly discussions of general behavior modification principles between the teacher and consulting psychologist (the first author). The teacher was asked to reward appropriate behaviors and ignore problem behaviors. Phase 3 lasted from weeks seven to eleven. Each day the target child received a letter from his teacher which was delivered to his mother. If the child manifested less than 40% problem behaviors, he was praised and given a commending letter, whereas greater than or equal to 40% misbehavior resulted in an unfavorable letter. When this procedure was initiated, the child's mother promised that if he received primarily favorable letters, he would be able to go on a special family trip. Positive letters also earned the child praise from his mother. During Phase 4, the child continued to receive positive or negative letters contingent upon daily conduct, however, no external home contingencies were implemented. Teacher and mother praise continued to be earned with positive letters.

Results

During the baseline period, the target child manifested a daily average of 50% problem behaviors. Furthermore, the teacher stated that his problem behaviors were extremely disruptive since other children often imitated his acting out behaviors.

During Phase 2, problem behaviors were only slightly reduced to 48%. After the child's mother and teacher jointly instituted the token letter system, with its contingent family trip, the percentage of discipline problems diminished to 31%. This low frequency of management difficulty decreased even further to 29% during the four week follow-up period. During this phase, the teacher reported that other children in her classroom were generally better behaved and responded more positively to her directions.

Discussion

The study's main finding was that home-letters, with and without an external contingency (Phases 3 and 4), conduced substantial reductions in problem behaviors; whereas general discussions of behavioral techniques (Phase 2) did not affect classroom misbehaviors. Given the child's high rates of problem behaviors, it is possible that solely attending to desirable behaviors and ignoring disruptive behaviors was not a potent enough technique to reduce the child's rule violations. It is also conceivable that mere discussions of these behavioral principles did not lead to a change in the teacher's reinforcing behaviors. In any event, implementation of the home-letter contingency led to immediate positive changes in the child's classroom behaviors. The target child initially was extremely interested in attaining positive daily reports in order to gain access to a family vacation. The authors had planned to exclude daily letters from the follow-up period, however, both the child and teacher requested that letters

be continued in this last phase. The teacher felt that letters were helping the child gain better control over his behavior. The child continued to be extremely eager to receive positive reports, and looked forward to the concomitant teacher and mother praise. During this last phase, rates of misbehaviors continued to decline. The target child learned self-regulatory skills initially to meet the external contingency and later to earn praise from the teacher and the mother.

The present study suggests that a relatively simple letter-home contingency can bring about important positive changes in a child with school acting-out problems. Furthermore, after removal of the contingency, the mere presence of the letter and praise effectively maintained classroom gains. Given the case-study nature of this study, the findings need to be interpreted with caution. Replication of this study with a larger sample would provide requisite data for determining the generalizability of findings.

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